

Addressing Whole Child Growth Through Strong Relationships:

The Evidence-Based Connections between
Academic and Social-Emotional Learning

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June 2019



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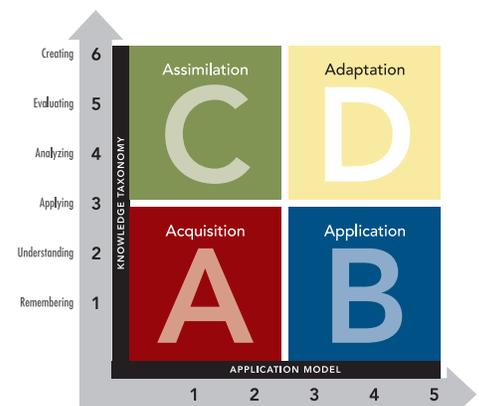
Like you, we at the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) have grown alarmed by the mental health issues we see plaguing our children. Given the amount of time students are in our care and the reality that mental health issues prevent students from engaging fully in their learning, we have been committed to developing supports for schools as they integrate social-emotional learning into their culture. To achieve this in the most effective way possible, we knew we needed a partner with area expertise and someone who knows the research inside and out. Even better, we are so pleased to be partnering with [Dr. Stephanie Jones](#), Director of the Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Lab and Gerald S. Lesser Professor of Early Childhood Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

In recent years, Dr. Jones has been pioneering research focused on the impact of social-emotional learning interventions on behavioral and academic outcomes and classroom practices in preschool and elementary school, including new strategy development, implementation, and testing. We are grateful and honored that she is joining our effort to reach more educators in need of evidence-based and cost-effective SEL instructional tools and interventions. – Dr. Bill Daggett

In 1991, ICLE created the Rigor/Relevance Framework, which overlays Bloom's Taxonomy, and its increasingly complex levels of thinking, with increasingly complex levels of relevant doing, i.e. work that is useful to the unpredictable real world in order to help students prepare for it. The result is a framework with four quadrants representing possible combinations of rigor and relevance. The Framework was designed as a simple yet robust tool to help educators plan for and assess higher levels of rigor and relevance in the classroom .

We have a common refrain: relevance makes rigor possible, and rigor makes life success possible. That is, by making the work we ask our students to do relevant to their lives and interests, they will engage in more rigorous thinking and learning tasks. If the work feels irrelevant to them, they will usually be unwilling to engage rigorously.

As we guided more and more educators to use the Rigor/Relevance Framework to its greatest potential, it became clear that positive, high-quality relationships make relevance possible—ones characterized by connection, support, and reciprocity. In other words, the Framework's greatest potential comes when it is underpinned and encompassed



The Rigor/Relevance Framework®

**Relationships make
relevance possible.**

**Relevance makes
rigor possible.**

**Rigor makes
life success possible**

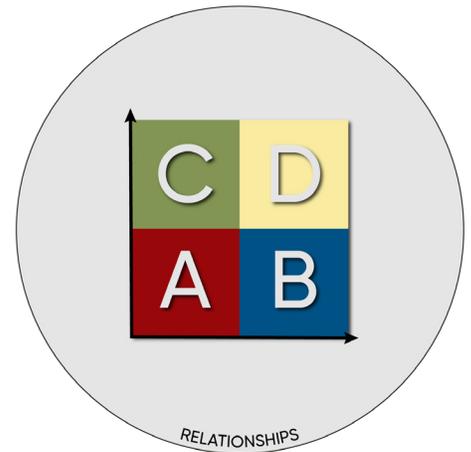
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by relationships. If a teacher is to make learning for her students relevant, then she has to know what her students—each of them—find interesting, fun, and meaningful. She must earn their trust so that her students, in turn, open up to her, share their lives, and become vulnerable learners. This is made possible only through relationships.

For years, we at ICLE have been talking about “the third R,”—relationships as a stepping stone to relevance and then to rigor. We began banging the drum of relationships more and more frequently and more passionately. As we collaborated with educators to increase rigor and relevance, we emphasized the importance of forming trusting relationships with all of their students. We witnessed as relationships “unlocked” ever more rigor and relevance in their classrooms. We could see again and again the power of relationships to encourage students to go deeper with their learning, take more learning leaps of faith, develop resilience and persistence, and contribute to their self-confidence and belief in their own potential.

More recently, and at a macro level, we have watched as so many of our children descend into a mental health crisis. So we have banged the drum of relationships louder still. We have incorporated into the conversation the importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) as both a conduit to and outcome of high-quality interactions and relationships. We know that if a child is suffering with anxiety, depression, or low self-worth, she cannot begin to climb out of this if she feels uncared for and unseen by the adults in her life. The need for caring relationships in schools has grown only more critical and for reasons that extend beyond rigor and relevance and into our students’ wellbeing and capacity to engage in school in the first place.

All of us know that relationships in schools are powerful. We know it intuitively. And we know it from experience. Yet it is only recently that the research has begun to catch up with what we know to be true. Not only is this validating our collective hunch that we must devote real time to cultivating relationships with ALL of our students, it is also beginning to show us why, specifically, and how.



High-quality relationships make rigor and relevance possible.

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The Latest in Brain Development Research

Until recently, our understanding of the brain has been that it is broken into three distinct parts with three distinct functions thought to be layered upon each other: 1) the low-level, primitive brain, which manages our survival instinct (e.g., respond to threat); 2) layered atop that is the social, affective brain, which was understood to generate emotions that steer the survival process (e.g., see threat, feel fear, run); 3) layered on top of that is the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain divided into left and right hemispheres that does all our high-level, abstract thinking. In the old paradigm, the prefrontal cortex was thought to be mostly separate from the survival/affective mechanisms of the brain.

“learning does not only happen in the thinking brain; it also happens in the feeling and surviving brain.”

However, the latest neuroscience is finding otherwise. The prefrontal cortex—where we contemplate math and philosophy, invent solutions, feel compassion, plan our future, admire someone’s virtue, etc.—is both a function *and* a driver of the survival/affective mechanisms of the brain. All three are codependent processes; how we think not only relies on our survival/affective mechanisms, but these mechanisms also reorganize themselves in service of how we think.

This means that how we think can change how we feel and change our survival mechanism—for better or worse. But what does this mean for educators? It means that learning does not only happen in the thinking brain; it also happens in the feeling and surviving brain. To teach is to consider and address all three parts of the brain and how they all work together to either support or undermine learning. We can teach in ways that literally augment intellectual capacity in the moment, or squash it.

Whole Brain Learning—and Whole Child Development—Starts With Relationships

How do we augment intellectual capacity? We prioritize relationships—through research-validated social-emotional learning opportunities—to help students perceive themselves as capable of reaching for more rigorous and relevant thinking and doing. Stepping back, the kinds of relationships that best optimize the interplay between all three parts of the brain are learning relationships.

Learning relationships, which exist between the adults, student – adults and students – students:

1. Are derived from care, trust, and safety such that students believe teachers and peers see them as valuable; in turn, the student cultivates a positive sense of self, grows motivated to learn, and develops social-emotional skills that are further reinforced through caring relationships. (Wentzel, 2012; Martin & Dowson, 2009)
2. Enable the teacher to get to know all students’ interests and circumstances as a means to make relevance possible and, in turn, make rigor possible to promote students’ lifelong learning and success.

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3. Help students learn how to cultivate healthy and appropriate relationships in their lives to support their overall wellbeing and mental health.
4. Help teachers fine-tune their own social-emotional skills and promote collaboration with colleagues, such that adults can model healthy relationships and work together to personalize SEL to all students, respectively.

John Hattie [says](#) of relationships, which he found to have a .72 effect size on achievement: “It is teachers who have created positive teacher-student relationships that are more likely to have the above average effects on student achievement” (Hattie, 2009). If every educator in a school is purposefully creating moments that reinforce learning relationships with all students on campus, then a school is pointed towards whole brain learning and whole child development. The entire school is working together to enhance all students’ learning potential and their wellbeing. For SEL to achieve its greatest impact on students, a school must take learning relationships a step further.

A True Culture of Learning Relationships

For a true culture of learning relationships to take hold, learning relationships must exist among the adults in the building, too. This must include all classified staff—lunchroom monitors, bus drivers, librarians, specialists, and so on. Learning relationships are the purview of every adult on campus, and every adult on campus must understand why relationships are so critical and her role in reinforcing them. Therefore, every adult on campus needs and deserves professional development and support to this end. Professional development must be in place to guide teachers and staff on the effective use of research-backed SEL instructional strategies and tools.

Research also indicates that all adults on campus need to serve as models of social-emotional skills and healthy relationships (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). A true culture of relationships, then, will help educators fine-tune their own social-emotional capacities and positive relationships with colleagues. Leadership must have a plan in place to support the emotional needs of all staff, including working with them to address the stressors and challenges they are facing as educators. Not only will this attention help adults reduce stress so that they can focus on what matters most—their students; it will also help nurture professional relationships in the building. In turn, morale is improved and collaboration is more commonplace and fruitful. When teachers collaborate, their support for students can be delivered in a more consistent, personalized, and personal way.

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Integrating Social-Emotional Learning Successfully: What the Research Says

In a positive sign, many in the field are attempting to design SEL curriculum for schools. This indicates that the industry grasps the urgency in supporting our students' SEL and its growing importance to the world beyond school. However, what we are learning is that these programs are too often rigid and generic, in that they lack the flexibility to meet the needs of specific students in front of specific educators. They are also often divorced from academic learning, which results in the missed opportunity to capitalize on the augmented learning that results when all three parts of the brain work together.

As the SEL programming field develops, so too does the research about what works. And when SEL works, it really *works*. Research shows that even relatively low-cost SEL tools can yield an impressive return; [per one study](#), for every \$1 invested in SEL, \$11 is returned in long-term benefits, in the form of: students' potential to gain in earning power and maintain long-term employment; students' potential to generate more income tax revenue for governments; reduced need for government services that result from violence, drugs, delinquency, and mental health issues.

The latest research (Bailey et al, 2019; Jones & Kahn, 2017) says that for SEL to generate its maximal benefit, it should:

1. Incorporate social-emotional skills in a specific order based on when students are developmentally ready for them.
2. Be flexible and depend on light-weight, easy-to-apply strategies, not a full curricula. We call these "kernels," as they are small but powerful SEL opportunities that can be sprinkled throughout the day to help students grow a range of social-emotional skills.
3. Be responsive to individual student needs in real time. If SEL is truly real-time, it will take place not just in the

KERNEL Sample:

Turtle technique for calming down

Description:

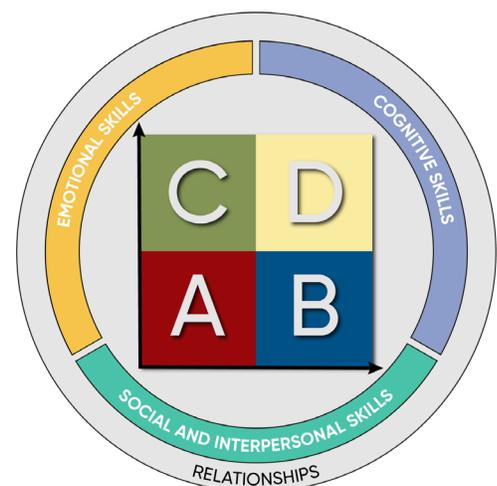
Using a turtle metaphor, child holds self, breathes through nose, and engages in verbal or sub-verbal self-coaching to calm down

SEL Domain:

Managing emotions and behavior

Behaviors affected:

Reduces arousal and aggression against peers or adults



Relationships Framework

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classroom but also anywhere a need for SEL kernels arises—the cafeteria, the sports field, hallways, etc. This means that SEL must be the responsibility of every adult on campus.

When built on these three features of successful SEL, SEL optimizes the interplay between all three parts of the brain because how students' *feel* about themselves as learners is addressed and enhanced. It is also integrated into the full school learning environment. It is responsive to the ever changing and real-time needs of all the students in the building, and not simply "adding one more thing" to educators' already overflowing responsibilities.

Meeting You Where You Are: Our Approach to Learning Relationships & SEL

The brain research is unequivocal: SEL is academic learning and vice versa. Whether we are aware of it or not, our children are in a constant state of SEL, where their perceptions and experiences either support or undermine their healthy social-emotional development and capacity to learn in general. For educators, this means that we can act with intention to foster learning relationships and integrate SEL into academic learning to simultaneously enhance rigor and relevance, develop healthy social-emotional skills, and prevent mental health issues for our students.

To that end, we have been committed to developing a plan that can support schools in an intentional effort to address SEL through the strategic implementation of evidence-backed SEL opportunities. And we have been committed to doing this in a way that doesn't lose sight of rigor and relevance. Only in the presence of all three—rigor, relevance, and SEL—will students gain all the skills necessary to thrive in an ever-changing working world: cognitive skills, emotional skills; and social and interpersonal skills. To achieve this, a school must focus on that which underpins these skills: a culture of learning relationships.

With neuroscience, learning relationships, and SEL research in mind, we have designed an integrated approach that supports whole brain and whole child development. We guide schools through the data collection and analysis process so that together we can design a strategic plan that addresses specific schools needs. Together, we craft an SEL strategy that outlines when and how to incorporate which social-emotional skills based on the developmental readiness of the students in a school, remains flexible and highly utilitarian, and allows all educators in the building to respond to student needs in real time. We also ensure that SEL is used to promote relevance, which can in turn promote rigor. Ultimately, the plan will integrate SEL into a school's specific learning environment, not just into core content areas or at specific times of day.

We also work with schools to achieve a true culture of learning relationships. We collaborate with leaders to design professional development that supports every adult on campus to fine-tune her own social-emotional skills, address individual stressors, and practice appropriate and effective application of SEL at every moment it's needed. We also help schools to carve out the space and time for adults to listen

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to and learn from each other, problem-solve collaboratively, and reflect and plan in the name of both boosting professional relationships and delivering more personalized and personal SEL to all students.

At this point, we are ready to walk schools through the SEL integration process. At this point, we function as coaches, providing ongoing guidance to educators as they practice implementing tailored SEL kernels both as a part of a flexible academic curriculum and in response to needs as they arise in real time. We remain available to coordinate and collaborate to ensure successful implementation. When issues arise, we work with schools to troubleshoot effectively. Our aim is not simply to provide a tool; our aim is also to be of service so that everyone in a school is supported in this urgent, crucial effort to become intentional conduits for healthy social-emotional development for *all* students.

Our competence is in the prevention and development of social-emotional issues and skills, respectively, while still elevating rigor and relevance in the classroom. While we are not experts in intervention and treatment programs to address more severe social-emotional and mental health issues, we help schools connect with those who are (e.g. Effective School Solutions). We proactively consider the SEL needs of staff, recommending additional ways leaders and administrators can support teachers and staff.

Importantly, our approach ensures that SEL is delivered to ALL students, not just those with acute mental health issues. While the need for SEL is more dire and obvious for students with known and severe mental health issues, SEL improves learning outcomes and futures for all students; it can also prevent mental health issues from arising or growing even more entrenched. As a result, when all students receive integrated, consistent, and effective SEL strategies, resources are freed up to deliver more targeted, timely support and interventions to students who need them most.



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Educators worldwide recognize Dr. Bill Daggett, the creator of the Rigor/Relevance Framework, for his proven ability to lead school reform and help Pre-K–12 educators effectively prepare students for the future. A former teacher and administrator, as well as director with the New York State Education Department, Bill has a special commitment to individuals with disabilities and has written numerous books, reports, and articles about learning and education.



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Stephanie Jones' research, anchored in prevention science, focuses on the effects of poverty and exposure to violence on children and youth's social, emotional, and behavioral development. Over the last ten years her work has focused on both evaluation research addressing the impact of preschool and elementary focused social-emotional learning interventions on behavioral and academic outcomes and classroom practices; as well as new curriculum development, implementation, and testing.

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